

# The Houston women's conference

In the history of American women's struggle for equality, the National Women's Conference at Houston, Nov. 18-21, must rank as equal in importance to the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, which gave birth to the modern women's movement. In recent times the Houston conference far overshadows any other single such event relating to women's role in American society.

Indeed, in the potential implications of its program and in the number, diversity, and representative authority of the delegates and observers in attendance, the Conference is unparalleled in American political experience.

The Conference was also unusual in that it was mandated and paid for by Congress to advise it and the President on women's rights and affairs, but was not controlled by either the President or Congress.

Over three-fourths of the delegates were elected at public state and territorial conferences. Unlike the "counter-conference" delegates who were self-appointed, they represented substantial constituencies. Along with the 10,000-15,000 observers (who paid their own way) the conference participants comprised a congregation of unprecedented diversity—in age, income levels, occupations, racial and ethnic origin, opinion and creed—to such an extent that the phrase commonly heard among participants was "a rainbow of women."

## Rumors of death dispelled.

This diversity did not prevent an efficiently run conference or the adoption by solid majorities of a "National Plan of Action" for presentation to the President, Congress, and the American people. It encouraged and facilitated, on the other hand, a rich exchange of views, the striking of new friendships and organizational networks, and the emergence of new women political leaders.

The conference laid to rest all rumors of the death or decay of the women's movement. It made poor prophets of Phyllis Schlafly and her allies who had predicted the movement would come to an end at Houston, and who belied their own prediction by later complaining about the conference's unity. Against the diversity and heterogeneity of the delegates, the ideological and social homogeneity of the "counter-conference" delegates stood out in stark contrast. If anything died at Houston, it was the myth of the power or popularity of the anti-feminist right.

The unity on program at the conference rests on solid social circumstances. First, the inequality of opportunity, treatment, and condition that all women suffer. Second, the accelerated entry of women into the world of work outside the home (49 percent of all women 16 years of age and older are in the work force, and 41 percent of the full-time work force are women), and the fact that the overwhelming majority of working women are wage or salary earning employees, not capitalists or employers. These two circumstances operate powerfully in generating common needs and common programmatic responses.

The recent movements of blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asian Americans have also had their educative effect. From their own experience as well women are especially sensitive to the injustices suffered on account of circumstance of birth, and the conference delegates were particularly receptive to the programmatic proposals of minority delegates (who made up one-third of the total, a larger minorities' representation than at any previous comparable gathering).

The prevalent class composition of



can women, and increasingly of the women's movement (as Liz Carpenter of ERAmerica said, "We can no longer be accused of being a middle-class white women's cause"), was punctuated by the prominent role of labor movement women, especially the Coalition of Labor Union Women, not only at Houston, but also at the state conferences that selected delegates. The conference will very likely strengthen the bonds among general women's organizations, the labor movement, and minorities' movements.

The 25-point National Plan of Action is indicative. Most of the resolutions passed were addressed to the conditions of working women. They ranged from demands for a full employment economy, a national health security system, social security and welfare reforms, a guaranteed annual income, unionization of unorganized working women, and transfer of spending from military to social purposes, to programs concerning child care, homemakers, educational opportunity, older women, rural women, the disabled, the battered, the imprisoned. Other programs such as those concerning the arts and humanities, the media, credit, insurance, victims of rape, and aid to small business women appeal to working class and non-working class women alike.

But the general thrust of the National Plan is toward social goals facilitated by a government (at all levels) to be made into one that is of, by, and for the people, as against market values and corporate investment priorities. In the debate on conference resolutions, the opposition delegates within the conference, like the "counter-conference" participants, were responding to something real when they defended the "free enterprise" system as

much as "pro-family" or "pro-life" themes.

The opposition delegates and the "counter-conference" rightists focused their attack for media purposes on the ERA (which the conference overwhelmingly reaffirmed), abortion, and homosexual rights. The conference majority were not intimidated. "Moderates" and "militants" joined in upholding principle against the temptations of a convenient opportunism. This demonstrated the maturity and growing self-confidence of the women's movement, among newcomers as well as veterans.

The challenge to the corporate system implicit in the National Plan will inevitably draw resistance from the legislatures and Congress as now constituted, and from President Carter. It will also lead to division in the women's movement. Such resistance and division, however, need not weaken the equalitarian wing of the women's movement, which is potentially the majority. They may, on the contrary, strengthen it by further clarifying the issues and the real stakes in fully achieving women's rights, and by quickening alliances with the poor, minorities, and labor.

## Learning from feminists.

As the National Plan focuses on legislative programs and hence on electoral politics, the challenge implicit in it will require the emergence of new political leaders rooted in working class interests (a process already evident at the conference), and the transformation of the legislative branches by the election of such leaders, both women and men. Karen DeCrow, ex-president of the National Organization for Women said as much in observing:

"Everybody was saying, 'Why do we have to go through Carter to the Congress? We could be the Congress.'" Easier said than done, but saying is a first step to doing.

The National Plan will now serve as a program around which to organize, just as the conference itself re-energized the women's movement and established new political alliances and networks within and among the states. It represents the adoption by a "mainstream" coalition of organizations and individuals of what was five years ago the Feminist agenda.

The feminist movement has shown how to achieve unity in diversity, and more, the greater strength of a unity that welcomes and sustains diversity. The feminists have also shown that the way to spread new (or revolutionary) ideas and to build organized strength around them is not to hide them in a closet or defer them until a future that never comes, but to talk about them with others, write about them, agitate, persuade, and convince. They have shown how to reach out to people in popular style without forsaking principles. Not being afraid of the American people, nor of ridicule or temporary rejection, they have persisted in the courage of their convictions while submitting them and themselves to popular judgment.

The feminists have shown that it is politically wise and realistic to have confidence in "the hearts, minds and moral consciences of men and women and what they [may] do to make our society truly democratic and open to all." ("Declaration of American Women," Houston Conference).

"We socialists have a lot to learn from the feminists."

